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Han, Sang-Jin; Shim, Young-Hee

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# The Global Economic Crisis, Dual Polarization, and Liberal Democracy in South Korea

*Sang-Jin Han & Young-Hee Shim* \*

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**Abstract:** »Globale Wirtschaftskrise, doppelte Polarisierung und liberale Demokratie in Südkorea«. This paper aims at a theoretical reflection on and an empirical analysis of the relationship between the global economic crisis and liberal democracy in South Korea. For this, we elaborate the concept of dual polarization and construct a model of path analysis which includes such variables as socio-economic and political-ideological cleavage, political party affiliation, ideological orientation, economic (crisis) outlook, and support for an autocratic presidential rule as potential threats to liberal democracy. Descriptively, the paper examines how liberal democracy has unfolded and where South Korea stands today with regard to the quality of her democracy. Analytically, the paper examines where the potential threat to liberal democracy comes from based on a general population survey in Korea from 2014. The major findings of our analysis include: 1) The support for autocratic presidential power is stronger among citizens than among MPs. 2) Political party affiliation, ideological orientation, and economic (crisis) outlook are closely interrelated and significantly affected by the political-ideological cleavage. All independent variables contribute to explaining support for an autocratic presidential rule. 3) Yet there also exists strong support for a democratic regime among both MPs and citizens.

**Keywords:** Economic crisis, liberal democracy, socio-economic polarization, political-ideological polarization, autocracy, South Korea.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Preliminary Remarks

South Korea represents a case of a new democracy<sup>1</sup> that exhibits not only advanced liberal democratic institutions but also a successful trajectory of trans-

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\* Sang-Jin Han, Department of Sociology, Seoul National University, 1 Gwanak-ro, Gwanak-gu, Seoul, 08826 South Korea; hansjin@snu.ac.kr.  
Young-Hee Shin, School of Law, Hanyang University, 222 Wangsimni-ro, Seongdong-gu, Seoul, 04673 South Korea; yhshim@hanyang.ac.kr.

ferring political power peacefully from the ruling to the opposition parties since 1997. Together with an undisputable record of economic modernization since the 1960s, this political achievement has attracted global attention. Yet Korea today is even more interesting in that she appears capable of dealing with the challenges of the global economic crisis while sustaining liberal democracy even though there are certain tendencies and problems that require careful investigation. This paper aims at such an investigation.

Needless to say, the Korean way of modernization and political development frequently underwent ups and downs in a relatively short period of time, suffering from dictatorial regimes,<sup>2</sup> but also showing a brave struggle for liberal democracy by students and citizens. Some of the major instances of the democratic movement for epochal changes include the *April Student Revolution* of 1960, the *May Gwangju Democratic Uprising* of 1980, the *June Democratic Movement* of 1987, the candlelight march against beef reimports from the U.S. in 2008, and the candlelight vigil for the impeachment of former President Park Geun-Hye in 2016.

This paper traces the overall trend of South Korean democracy since the 1980s, asking the following research questions: 1) How has liberal democracy progressed? 2) How has socio-economic and political-ideological polarization unfolded within the context of the global economic crisis? 3) Where does South Korea stand today in terms of the quality of its democracy? 4) Is there any potential threat to liberal democracy, and, if so, where does it come from?

This paper is both descriptive and analytic. It is descriptive insofar as we examine two aspects of Korean democratic development: the longitudinal trend of liberal democracy (Han 2009, 2002, 2001a, 2001b) on the one hand and socio-economic and political-ideological polarization on the other (Han 2007). We will move on to examine the quality of democracy with respect to civil rights and socio-economic rights, paying attention to the normative and the substantive dimensions of democracy, that is, democracy as value commitment and the political performance of the incumbent government. We will then raise our key analytic question, namely the level of support for an autocratic presidential rule, which we assume to constitute a potential threat to liberal democracy. While the first two parts are more or less descriptive, the third part is explicitly analytical. For this, a path analysis will be performed to determine the impact of independent variables such as the political-ideological and the socio-economic cleavage, political party affiliation, and ideological orientation

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<sup>1</sup> With the defeat of Japan in WWII, Korea was liberated in 1945, but was divided in two zones along 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. This resulted in the first democratic elections in South Korea in May 1948 which took place under UN supervision

<sup>2</sup> After the end of the Korean War in 1953, South Korea had an authoritarian regime and experienced two military coups in 1961 and 1979, which both times resulted in a return to power of authoritarian presidents. The dictatorial regimes were governed by Rhee Syng-man (1948-1960), Park Chung-hee (1961-1979), and Chun Du-whan (1980-1987).

– as well as the economic (crisis) outlook as mediating variable – on the dependent variable, the level of support for an autocratic presidential rule. The conclusion is that threat and hope are in balance when we evaluate where Korean democracy stands today.

The key analytic question is whether or not, and, if so, how and to what extent the two economic crises Korea experienced during the last decades have posed a potential threat to liberal democracy. The first crisis was the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s, the second the global economic crisis that started in 2008. Overall, however, liberal democratic institutions have progressed well in Korea since 1987 and particularly since 1998, when the first peaceful transfer of governmental power occurred in Korea through the direct presidential election in December 1997 (Han 2018b and 2014; Choi 2012). An important point is that socio-economic polarization began to increase during this period because that change in government coincided with the first economic crisis. The government of Kim Dae-jung was able to overcome the economic crisis. However, ideological polarization began to manifest itself during his tenure in office, affected by his so-called “Sunshine Policy”. The conservative party (Grand National Party at that time, later Saenuri Party, currently Liberty Korea Party) that had lost power in the presidential elections of 1997 and 2002 began to attack the new government as being too soft on the North Korean regime, thereby sparking off ideological conflicts. When the conservative party regained power after the presidential election of 2007, socio-economic and political-ideological polarization began to penetrate each other deeply. Consequently, party politics became far more divisive than in the past. This political and ideological cleavage has affected public perceptions of the quality of democracy as well as the management of the economic crisis. For this reason, this paper includes a detailed description of what has happened in Korea before turning to the question of the potential threat to liberal democracy.

With this goal in mind, we will first present an account of the overall trend of political democratization in Korea from 1981 to 2008. V-Dem’s Liberal Democracy Index confirms the remarkable advancement of liberal democracy after 1987, as well as a slight decline since 2008. Against this background, we will examine the two modes of polarization and show some evidence concerning the negative impacts of these polarizations on economic life and democratic politics. The data we use here are mostly MP surveys from 2007 and 2013 (Klingemann and Hoffmann-Lange 2018, in this issue) and the Korean general population survey of 2014.<sup>3</sup> Although this paper is only a case study of Korea, there are good reasons to assume a similar tendency in other new democracies like Poland, Chile, Turkey, and South Africa (see the contributions of Hoff-

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<sup>3</sup> The general population survey in Korea was conducted in January 2014 and included 1,059 respondents. It was funded by the Joongmin Foundation for Social Theory and the field work was carried out by Hankook Research.

mann-Lange, Esmer and Okçuoğlu as well as Markowski and Kwiatowska in this issue).

## 1.2 Conceptual Clarification

Theoretically, we consider Giddens' (1986) idea of "structuration" useful. It presupposes certain patterns of reciprocal interactions between the determinants and the outcomes at multiple levels. Yet, it remains open how to link this idea to empirical analysis. This has led us to develop a path analytical model with two primary determinants, two secondary determinants, a mediator variable and a dependent variable. The primary determinants are structural variables and the secondary determinants independent action variables. We use the term primary determinants to emphasize the prime importance of structural conditions as determinants of life chances. These are the socio-economic and the political-ideological structure. The former brings about the socio-economic cleavage and the latter the political-ideological cleavage. When we speak of polarization in this context, it should be clear that polarization involves a social construction of reality rather than being an objective fact. Such social constructions may differ from one country to another, depending on many factors such as political communication and norms of inclusiveness. In South Korea, for instance, because this norm is widespread, social sensitivity regarding political polarization was high when the global economic crisis swept Korea.

Figure 1: Path Analytical Model

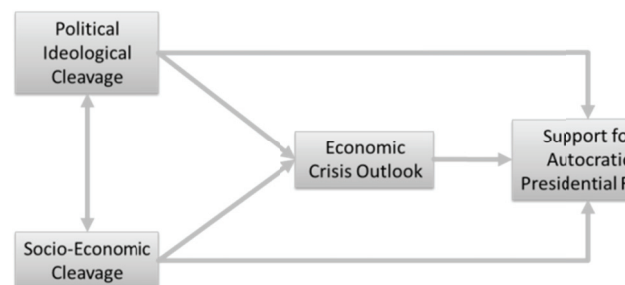


Figure 1 shows the relations among the variables included in the model. The secondary determinant was omitted in order to present a simplified overall picture. The full path analytical model will include political party affiliation and ideological orientation as the secondary determinant though.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The variables for the path analytic model were measured as follows:  
 Socio-economic Status: Lower Class=0, Middle Class=1  
 Party Affiliation: Voted for Ruling Party=0, Voted for Opposition Party=1

We operationalized the socio-economic cleavage a dummy variable with two categories by asking respondents whether they see themselves as belonging to the middle class or to the lower class.<sup>5</sup> For the operationalization of the political-ideological cleavage we assumed that a bureaucratic-authoritarian state has dominated all aspects of modernization in the East Asian countries (Han 2018a). Consequently, a state-centered mentality is deeply rooted in South Korea. Against this state-centered legacy, the process of democratic transformation has unfolded since the 1980s and given rise to an alternative position which we call a “citizens-first” position (Han 2017b, 205). In South Korea, a bottom-up participatory paradigm of citizens has emerged through the social process of communication, sharply distinguished from a traditional top-down authoritarian paradigm of the state. Thus, we asked the respondents which side they would take in a conflict over between a government decision and the citizens’ preferences concerning an important public issue.<sup>6</sup> This conceptual strategy means that we identify the political-ideological cleavage empirically as one between state power and citizen empowerment. The former suggests that one sees reality from the perspective of government authority, whereas in the latter one sees reality from the perspective of the citizens.

As to the secondary determinant, party affiliation is either the party membership of the MPs or the party vote of the citizens. Ideological orientation was measured by self-placement on a 10-point left-right scale with a range from 1 on the left to 10 on the right.

Concerning the mediating variable, we started from the assumption that it is not the objective depth of the economic crisis itself, but rather its perception, particularly the economic (crisis) outlook that shapes individuals’ preferences regarding the government’s policies to cope with the crisis. We thus distinguished three types of economic outlook: positive, negative, and constant,<sup>7</sup> and investigated their relationship with independent and dependent variables.

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Ideology: Range 1 (conservative) – 10 (progressive)

Political-Ideological Cleavage: Trust Government=0 Trust Citizens=1

Economic Crisis Outlook: Negative=0 Constant=1 Positive=2

Support for Autocratic Presidential Rule: Range 1 (Strongly Oppose) – 4 (Strongly Support)

<sup>5</sup> The small minority of respondents with an upper-class identity has been merged with the middle class.

<sup>6</sup> The question for measuring the political-ideological cleavage was the following: *“When a decision by the government and preference by citizens as reflected in public opinion are in conflict concerning an important public policy that affects your life, which side would you take? One argues that we should follow the government because it represents public authority and the other argues that we should follow citizens because the policy affects your life.”* The general population survey of 2014 included this question, but not the MPs survey.

<sup>7</sup> We measured these outlooks by combining the responses to the following two questions: *“Compared to 12 months ago, do you think that the general economic situation in your country is: 1) a lot better, 2) a little better, 3) stayed the same, 4) a little worse and 5) a lot worse?”* And *“Over the next 12 months, how do you think the general economic situation in*

Finally, concerning the dependent variable, we assume support for an autocratic presidential rule to constitute a potential threat to liberal democracy. The analytic focus of this variable is clear because, like military rule, it may contribute to destroying the institutional framework of liberal democracy, whereas populist politics, often referred to as a threat to democracy, too, is compatible with electoral democracy.

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## 2. Transition to Democracy and Longitudinal Political Trends in Korea

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As measured by the Human Development Index (HDI) compiled annually by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Korea has experienced significant progress with respect to several indicators included in the HDI.<sup>8</sup> The average life expectancy at birth increased from 71.7 years in 1990 to 81.9 in 2014. The number of average years of schooling increased from 8.9 years in 1990 to 11.9 in 2014. Gross national income (GNI) per capita increased from US \$12,064 in 1990 to US \$33,890 in 2014. The overall HDI score rose from 0.73 in 1990 to 0.90 in 2014. These trends point to a successful economic modernization of Korean society.

However, the relations of politics, economy, and civil society have involved ambiguities and uncertainties, particularly after the period of democratic transition was completed and regular democratic elections were introduced (Han 2009, 2014; Choi 2012; Im 2014; Shin 2012). This decline may be explained by the so-called Asian economic crisis that resulted in massive layoffs of workers and large-scale shutdowns of companies. This was a severe blow to Koreans accustomed to continued economic growth for several decades. Civil society, once seen as providing the energy for change, became now exceedingly conflictual and divisive due to the economic, ideological, regional, and generational cleavages in Korean society. Furthermore, the global economic recession from 2008 onwards has produced additional strains, conflicts and risks, including a rising gap between the rich and the poor. This trend may be detrimental to the political and social integration of the country and is apt to damage the public's evaluation of democracy. Disillusioned by the so-called "hostile coexist-

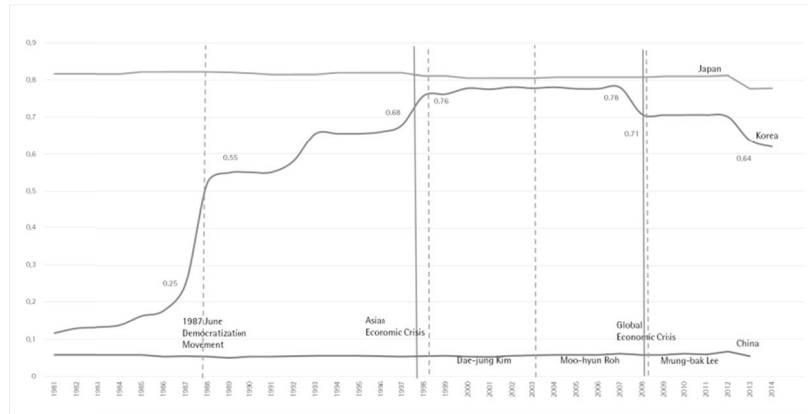
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*this country will be? 1) a lot better, 2) a little better, 3) has stayed the same, 4) a little worse, 5) a lot worse.*" The first question refers to a comparison of the current situation with the past, and the second refers to the expectation for the future economic situation compared with the present. Out of the nine resulting trends, we classified three upward trends as positive (optimistic) outlooks and three downward trends as negative (pessimistic) outlooks and one trend with no change as constant. A small number of irregular patterns were excluded from the analysis.

<sup>8</sup> Source: <<http://hdr.undp.org/en/data-explorer>>, last accessed: Jan. 12, 2017.

ence” of the governing and opposition parties, which seemed almost completely out of touch with the everyday life of ordinary citizens deeply hit by economic crisis, people began to ask what democracy really meant for them.

Figure 2: Liberal Democracy Index for Korea, Japan and China



Source: V-dem datasets <<https://www.v-dem.net/en/data/data-version-6-2/>>, last accessed: Jan. 12, 2017.

Note: Index Formula =  $.25 * \text{electoral democracy index} + .25 * \text{liberal component index} + .5 * \text{electoral democracy index} * \text{liberal component index}$

Figure 2 shows the longitudinal trend of liberal democracy in Korea (Coppedge et al. 2016).<sup>9</sup> The figure shows an early and gradual transition to democracy beginning in 1980. The military dictatorship of the Park Chung-Hee regime (1961-1979) was succeeded – interrupted only by a short democratic interlude – by the authoritarian rule by Chun Du-Hwan that lasted from 1980 to 1987 (Han 1987, 2018a; Im 1987). However, from June 1987, a pro-democratic movement started to rise and democratic transition moved forward, triggered by such traumatic events as the death of two college students, one caused by torture and the other caused by tear gas during a street demonstration in Seoul (Han 1999, 2001b, 2005). The liberal democracy index for Korea was only

<sup>9</sup> Korea has a presidential system of government with two major political parties competing for power. It has achieved not only procedural (electoral) democracy but also peaceful changes in government through elections. In this sense, it has attracted global attention. Yet, two points deserve special attention. First, majoritarian democracy allows the winner full control of the government to implement their policy agenda. This intensifies electoral competition and implies that the losers tend to fear for their political future. Secondly, because of the division of the Korean peninsula, South Korean politics is characterized by strong concerns regarding national security. As the conservative party tends to invoke the specter of threats for national security to maintain their upper hand in politics, this issue has become extremely divisive.



about 0.14 in 1980, but rose rapidly to 0.52 in 1988. It rose further to 0.76 in 1998 with the first change in government after the election of Kim Dae-Jung. Figure 2 clearly shows that the Asian economic crisis did not affect the index of liberal democracy. It remained at a high level until 2007. However, in 2008, when the conservative government of Lee Myung-bak came to power, the index dropped to 0.71 from 0.78 (the first drop) and further to 0.64 in 2013 when Park Geun-Hye, the daughter of former dictatorial ruler Park Chung-Hee, took office (the second drop). This decline may have been due to the change in government and the authoritarian policy orientations of the new government. Yet it may also have been affected by the economic decline triggered by the second economic crisis.

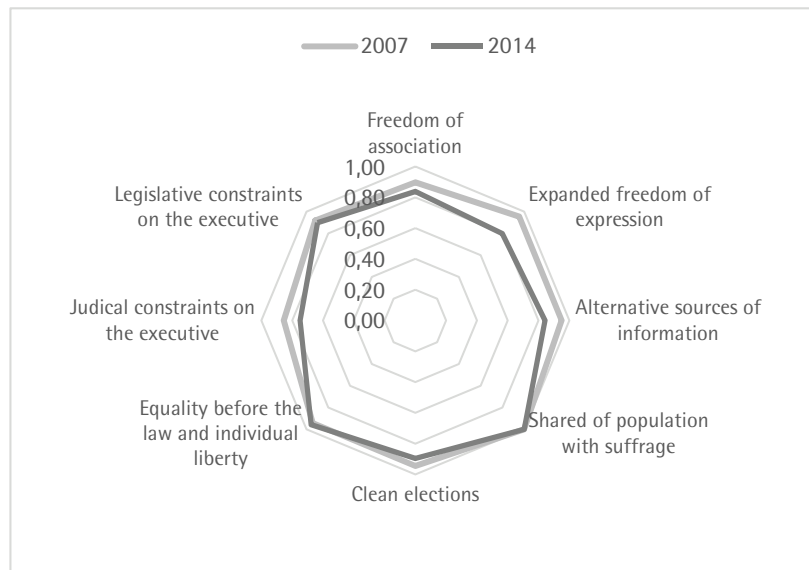
When we compare the liberal democracy index for Korea with that of other countries in the region, the rapid transition of Korea stands out. For example, the liberal democracy index for Japan has been about 0.8 and very stable for 35 years. China's values are about 0.06 and equally stable. Compared with these two countries, Korea shows a rapid transition to democracy with some fluctuations until 1997, when the index stabilized at a high level after the first democratic change in government.

We can further break down the index into its eight constituent dimensions of "liberal democracy" to observe this trend in more detail. The eight dimensions are 1) freedom of association, 2) expanded freedom of expression, 3) clean election index, 4) access to alternative information sources, 5) percent of population with suffrage, 6) equality before the law, 7) judicial and 8) legislative constraints on the executive.<sup>10</sup>

Figure 3 shows the values for the eight dimensions in 2007 and 2014. The year 2007 was the last year of government by the Democratic (progressive) Party. The figure shows almost no difference between these two points in time with respect to legislative constraints on the executive, equality before the law, and share of population with suffrage. However, the quality of democracy decreased significantly, especially in the dimensions of freedom of expression, freedom of association, alternative sources of information and judicial constraints on the executive. This tendency was also reflected in public opinion, as our general population surveys of 2007 and 2014 show. Public perceptions of a decline in basic civil and political rights led to doubts and frustrations about the role of the government, especially with regard to the quality of democracy.

<sup>10</sup> Detailed information on the operationalization of these eight dimensions can be found in the V-Dem Codebook 2017: <[https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer\\_public/84/a8/84a880ae-e0ca-4ad3-aff8-556abfdaff70/v-dem\\_codebook\\_v71.pdf](https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/84/a8/84a880ae-e0ca-4ad3-aff8-556abfdaff70/v-dem_codebook_v71.pdf)> (last accessed on March 26, 2018)

Figure 3: Dimensions of Liberal Democracy in South Korea, 2007, and 2014



Source: V-dem datasets <<https://www.v-dem.net/en/data/data-version-6-2/>>, last accessed: Jan. 12, 2017

Note: The corners signify the eight dimensions mentioned above. The scale for the cobweb lines is indicated in the middle.

### 3. Dual Polarization

#### 3.1 The Increase in Socio-Economic Polarization

In Korea, socio-economic disparities started to increase visibly in 1998, when the Asian economic crisis hit the country (Kim 2017; Seong 2017). Numerous businesses collapsed and a large number of workers lost their jobs. This was a severe blow to most Koreans accustomed to steady economic growth, dreaming of a middle class country. Comparatively, the Korean situation may still not look as desperate as other countries such as ones in Southern Europe (Greece, Italy, and Spain). Yet one should bear in mind the high level of public perception (construction) of socio-economic polarization in South Korea evolving along with her national memories and developmental trajectories.

**Table 1: Socio-Economic Indicators of Korea: 1990-2015**

	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015
GDP per Capita (US \$) <sup>A</sup>	6516.31	12332.98	11947.58	18639.52	22086.95	27105.08
GDP Growth Rate (%) <sup>B</sup>	3	3.05	4.4	3.85	6.5	2.73
HDI <sup>C</sup>	0.749	0.8	0.839	0.875	0.905	0.901
Unemployment Rate (%) <sup>D</sup>	2.4	2	4.4	3.7	3.7	3.6
Irregular Employment Rate (%) <sup>E</sup>	45.76	41.86	52.13	36.6	33.3	32.5
Youth Unemployment Rate (%) <sup>F</sup>	5.5	4.6	8.1	8	7.9	9.1
Single Household Rate (%) <sup>G</sup>	9	12.7	15.5	20	23.9	27.2
Gini Coefficient <sup>H</sup>	0.256	0.251	0.266	0.317	0.32	0.295
Suicide Rate per 100,000 Persons <sup>I</sup>	8.8	12.7	16.6	29.9	33.5	N/A
Poverty Rate of Elderly (Under Poverty Line) <sup>J</sup>	N/A	N/A	N/A	32	48.2	51.2
Poverty Rate of Elderly (Under 50% of Median Income) <sup>K</sup>	N/A	N/A	N/A	45	59.1	62.1

Source:

A: GDP per capita – World Bank

B: GDP growth rate – World Bank

C: HDI – UNDP Human Development Report

D: Unemployment Rate – Korean Statistical Information Service Database

E: Irregular Employment Rate – Annual Report on the Economically Active Population Survey (1990-2000) & Korean Statistical Information Service Database (2005-2015)

F: Youth Unemployment Rate – Korean Statistical Information Service Database

G: Single Household Rate – Korea Population and Housing Census Database

H: Gini Coefficient – Household Survey data of Statistics Korea

I: Suicide Rate per 100,000 Persons – OECD

K: Poverty Rate of Elderly – Korea Poverty Statistics Yearbook 2005-2016 by Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs

Table 1 shows that Korea's GDP was markedly lower in 2000 than in 1995.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the unemployment rate, the rate of temporary employment and youth unemployment, the share of single households and the suicide rate rose considerably while Korea went through structural adjustments dictated by the IMF. As a consequence, not only blue-collar workers but also many members of the middle class (professionals, managerial staff, technical supervisors, and white-collar employees) lost their jobs. The number of people with irregular employment contracts increased sharply too, and their standard of living

<sup>11</sup> The Korean GDP growth rate in 2007 was more than 5 percent. It dropped rapidly to 2.8% in 2008, reaching its lowest score of 0.7% in 2009. It briefly recovered to 6.5% in 2010, but since 2012 onwards it remains about 3%. This still may look not as desperate as in other countries like Greece. But it shows that the global economic crisis from 2008 onwards has had a substantial impact on the Korean economy.

deteriorated. A decline in income frequently goes hand in hand with exclusion from various forms of social insurance (pensions, workplace accident protection, unemployment insurance), all of which contributed to an increase in the number of working poor.

One of the most serious problems of the increasing socio-economic disparities is the increase in youth unemployment. As Table 1 shows, the rate was 5.5% in 1990, and then increased to 8.1% in 2000 and to 9.1% in 2015. Conversely, the employment ratio in the age group of 20 to 24 decreased continuously from 51.6% in 2005 to 44.3% in 2010 and 43.2% in 2013 (Han 2017a). Another serious problem is poverty among older people. The number of older people below the poverty line increased from 32% in 2005 to 48.2% in 2005 and 51.2% in 2015. The number of those below 50 % of the median income increased from 45% to 59.1% and 62.1% during the same period. Likewise, the suicide rate per 100,000 persons has increased continuously.

Another serious problem is the increasing disparity between employees with standard employment contracts and those with other kinds and often precarious employment (Shin 2013; Han 2017a). As of 2015, the latter made up 32.5% of the total employment. Precise estimates regarding the size of this group are lacking due to the variety of such different forms of employment as either temporary or part-time job or other non-standard forms such as contract work. Given the technical difficulties in determining the exact size of this sector, Table 1 shows that the size of temporary employment broadly defined reached its highest share with about 52% in 2000 when the government employed large numbers of part-time workers for public works in response to the first economic crisis. No matter how we estimate its size, there is no doubt that the share of these irregular forms of employment is high today and has significantly increased in the wake of the two economic crises. Therefore, it is important to draw attention to the problems of the working poor. As of 2015, the monthly wage of employees with irregular employment contracts was only 55.8% of that of regular employees. Their hourly wage was 64.3%.

Summing up, the Korean experience of increasing socio-economic disparities since 1997 is revealing. Shocked by two economic crises and driven by economic globalization and global competition, the large corporations have become preoccupied with short-term profit maximization at the expense of small subcontractors. The disparity between the highest income bracket and lowest income bracket, together with the widening gap between large-scale conglomerates and small to medium enterprises and the growing cleavages in employment patterns between regular and irregular workers, have given rise to a strong social perception of socio-economic polarization.

### 3.2 Trends towards Political-Ideological Polarization

Now, we come to political-ideological polarization in Korea (Choi 1994). To reiterate our discussion, socio-economic polarization has brought about increasing inequalities and disparities. However, deepening inequalities are not simply the result of economic globalization and neoliberal policies. They also presuppose an underlying network among power-holders in government, business, labor, media, and other interest groups, allowing them to pursue their interests (Mills 1959). This implies a systematic linkage between the socio-economic and the political-ideological cleavage. The empirical outcome of the first cleavage usually refers to socio-economic status whose explanatory power for the standard of living is evident. However, what we call secondary determinants, that is, political party affiliation and ideological orientation, are more closely related to the political-ideological cleavage than to the socio-economic one, as we will see soon. The political-ideological cleavage largely shapes the citizens' perception of political reality.

In South Korea, political-ideological polarization has entailed a proliferation of intense conflicts and head-on confrontation between the two major political parties which mobilize their members and supporters by means of ideological and emotional appeals.<sup>12</sup> The resulting politics of emotion may uncover an underlying struggle for hegemony (Lukes 1974; Gavanta 1980). In this regard, the major characteristics of the Korean experience of polarization are as follows:

- 1) As in other countries, Korea also shows a high degree of socio-economic inequality that has been exacerbated by the global economic crisis.
- 2) This cleavage is not limited to socio-economic issues, but also involves different life styles, value orientations and mentalities.
- 3) The socio-economic and the political-ideological polarizations are closely interrelated, thereby intensifying the conflict between the two political camps.
- 4) This implies a high degree of emotional confrontation between the two parties and their supporters to the extent that they refuse to engage in serious negotiations and are not willing to accept any compromises.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The typical strategy taken by power elites is inviting and reinforcing confrontational (hard-line) responses from the counterpart. In this way, they reciprocally control the political agenda by continuing a confrontational politics. Polarization expands to society when the politically organized supporters of the political parties confront each other with manufactured voices and emotions.

<sup>13</sup> This clarification helps to understand the context in which the formation of the two camps of state power and citizens took place. It also helps to understand why the perception of political reality is primarily shaped by political-ideological differences rather than by socio-economic status. The two major political parties have been able to monopolize the political game, yet they are insulated from the everyday concerns of the citizens such as increasing poverty, inequality and socio-economic polarization.

The impact of political-ideological polarization on the evaluation of the government's performance in managing the economic crisis was measured by the following question: "How do you evaluate the performance of different national and international actors in handling the impact of the crisis?" "1" meant that the performance of the actor was very poor and "10" meant that it was very competent. Tables 2 and 3 show that the evaluation by MPs and citizens of the authorities in charge of managing the recession in Korea, such as the Blue House, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance, the party in government and the opposition party, strongly depends on one's party affiliation, ideological preference, and economic (crisis) outlook.<sup>14</sup> These evaluations are more strongly influenced by the political-ideological rather than the socio-economic cleavage. Respondents with a conservative ideological orientation, affiliated with the conservative Saenuri party that was in power at the time (2014) and with an optimistic economic outlook rated government performance more positively than supporters of the opposition party with a progressive orientation and a pessimistic view of the economic development. The exact relationships among these variables are provided in Figure 8.

**Table 2:** Evaluation of Korean Authorities in Charge of Economic Policy– MPs 2013

Political Institution	Economic Outlook				Ideology			Political Party		
	Positive	Constant	Negative	f-test	Conservative	Progressive	f-test	Ruling Party	Opposition Party	f-test
The Blue House	56.1	33.5	29.0	17.861***	59.8	26.2	97.672***	59.5	22.2	148.397***
Ministry of Economic Affairs	56.8	35.6	28.7	21.112***	56.8	28.4	67.784***	56.8	24.8	103.973***
Party in Government	56.4	33.5	30.7	19.033***	58.1	28.6	76.718***	58.3	24.8	122.295***
Opposition Party	42.5	44.2	40.6	0.289	39.8	43.3	1.024	39.9	43.6	1.128

Source: CMP Survey 2013. Average scores on a 100-point scale

<sup>14</sup> The Blue House in Korea is the seat of the presidential office. The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance is in charge of economic planning, public finance, and the implementation of economic policies. The Korean congress is a unicameral legislature composed of about 300 MPs. The Korean party system is characterized by a high degree of competitiveness with close results in parliamentary elections.

**Table 3:** Evaluation of Korean Authorities in Charge of Economic Policy – Citizens 2014

Political Institution	Economic Outlook				Ideology			Political Party		
	Positive	Constant	Negative	f-test	Conservative	Progressive	f-test	Ruling Party	Opposition Party	f-test
The Blue House	54.5	41.1	26.1	172.06***	51.1	23.8	447.20***	48.9	27.4	272.95***
Ministry of Economic Affairs	52.8	40.9	26	171.06***	48.2	25.6	299.54***	46.9	28	224.35***
Party in Government	31.2	29.6	17.1	59.633***	28.6	18.9	53.872***	28.1	20.3	39.212***
Opposition Party	43.4	33.1	19.1	124.59***	41.1	16.9	328.72***	39.2	20.2	214.46***

## 4. Dual Polarization and Challenge to Democracy

### 4.1 Quality of Democracy Assessed Empirically

The key analytic question of this paper asks if the global economic crisis has affected liberal democracy in Korea. Before we tackle this issue, we want to examine to what extent the crisis has influenced the citizens' expectations from democracy. As the economy develops and the standard of living improves, it can be expected that citizens react more strongly when their standard of living is endangered. Likewise, as democracy moves on, citizens expect more from democracy than the mere observance of democratic procedures, as seen in studies of value change (Inglehart and Welzel 2005).

This is why we pay attention to the concept of the quality of democracy, including civil-political and socio-economic rights. According to O'Donnell,

an assessment of the quality of democracy should not be indifferent to the extent to which some basic aspects of human development and human rights have been achieved, nor to the number and social characteristics of those who are deprived. Simply put, severe deprivation in these matters means that except for exceptional individuals, their political agency is disabled. Insofar as democracy entails political citizenship, including its participatory rights, it includes the expectation that everyone is at least above a floor of basic human capabilities and human rights that enables them, if they wish, to exercise their political citizenship. (O'Donnell 2004, 62-3)

The key point of O'Donnell is that civil-political rights and socio-economic rights, as two basic components of the quality of democracy, are so interrelated in democratic society that the first serves as the basis of the latter. There is a

broad consensus about the importance of fundamental civil (liberal) rights for democracy. However, the socioeconomic aspects of the quality of democracy are equally important.

This is due to my belief that in order for these [socioeconomic] needs to be met, the enjoyment of political rights and important advances in civil rights are very important. Otherwise, the policies against poverty and inequality will continue being captured and distorted by ingrained practices of clientelism and paternalism. Democracy and its rights are important – probably they are necessary conditions – for advances in human development that are not easily reversible and/or submerge the popular sector in further clientelistic dependency. (O'Donnell 2004, 32).

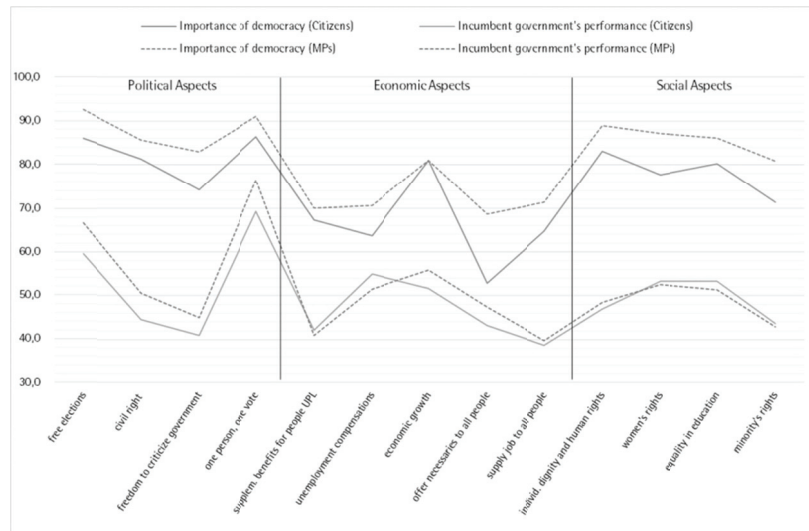
A pertinent empirical question is, then, how these two dimensions of the quality of democracy work in Korea (Han 2010). Therefore, the surveys of MPs and citizens included a list of 13 characteristics of democracy. Respondents were first asked to rate the degree to which they considered these as essential characteristics of a democracy. In a second step, they were asked to rate to what extent they were actually realized in the country. The importance ratings measure citizen demands, while the second question measures the perceived democratic performance of the incumbent government, among them civil liberties and political participation rights, free and equal elections and the freedom to criticize the government. Economic rights include supplementary benefits to people below the poverty line, economic growth, unemployment compensation, measures to ensure a basic standard of living for the poor and government responsibility for full employment. Social rights, finally, are distinguished as a third group of rights that involve both of these dimensions. The respect for human dignity, women's rights, equal educational opportunities, and minority rights are basic human rights, but at the same time they are supposed to prevent economic discrimination against the members of economically disadvantaged groups.

Figure 4 shows the differences in the perception of democracy by MPs and citizens with respect to citizen demands and democratic performance in Korea based on the 2014 survey data. It shows the following characteristics. First, MPs and citizens converge on the view that the political-civil rights listed, including both civil and social rights, are more essential for democracy than socio-economic rights. Second, civil and social rights show a larger gap between democratic demands and perceived democratic performance among both MPs and citizens. This implies greater conflicts over the quality of democracy with respect to these rights. Third, MPs show a stronger normative commitment to democracy than citizens. Fourth, the perceived democratic performance is particularly low with regard to the freedom to criticize the government, supplementary benefits for people below the poverty line, government responsibility for full employment, and minority rights. Fifth, citizens are more critical of the incumbent government's democratic performance than MPs. This indicates that citizens place less emphasis on liberal democratic rights, but at



the same time they are more critical of the democratic performance of the government.

**Figure 4: Importance of Democracy and Evaluation of the Incumbent Government's Performance in Korea (MPs and Citizens)**

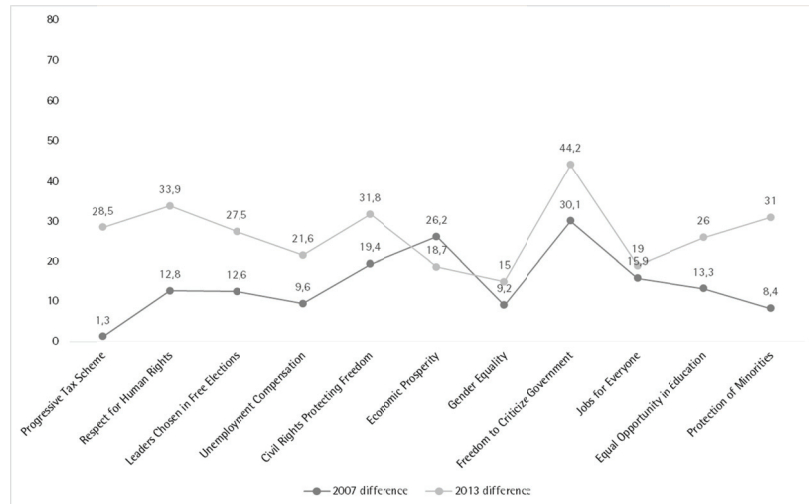


Source: CMP Survey 2013, Average scores on a 100-point scale.  
Source: General Population Survey 2014. Average scores on a 100-point scale.

Furthermore, we find an increasing gap between the evaluations of the members and supporters of the ruling and opposition party regarding the democratic performance of the government. This may have been caused both by the global economic crisis as well as by the change in government in 2012. The synchronic gap refers to the gap between the winners and losers of the elections in 2004 and 2012 with regard to their evaluation of the democratic performance of the incumbent government (Han 2016). When the first round of the surveys used for analysis (WVS in 2005; MP survey 2007) was conducted, the progressive party was in power which is reflected in the results. When the surveys of 2013/14 were conducted, however, the conservative party was in power. The differences in the evaluations of the democratic performance of the government by the MPs and the supporters of the governing and the opposition party are striking. In the case of the MPs, for instance, the synchronic gap over subsidies to the poor was only 1.3 (100 maximum) in 2007 but increased to 28.5 in 2013. The gap over respect for human rights increased from 12.8 in 2007 to 33.9 in 2013. The gap over unemployment compensation increased from 9.6 to 21.6 and the gap for the freedom to criticize the government increased from 19.4 to

31.8 during that period (Figure 5). This increased synchronic gap confirms that the political-ideological polarization intensified from 2007 to 2014.

Figure 5: Synchronic Gap 2007, 2013

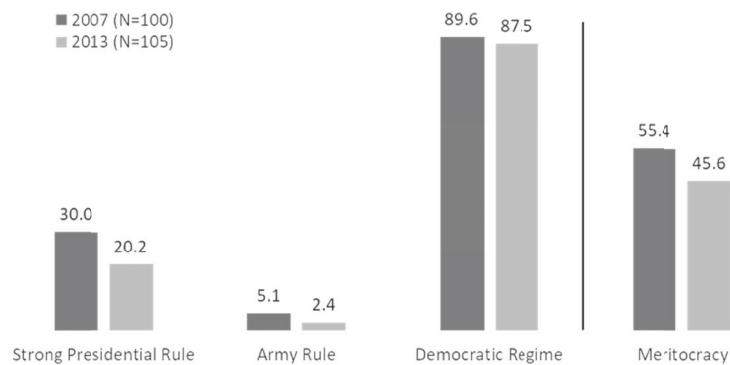


Source: CMP Surveys 2007 and 2013. Average scores on a 100-point scale.

## 4.2 Support for Liberal Democracy

We can check the support for democracy on two levels. The first is the normative value commitment assigned to living in a democratic country. The second is a preference for a democratic political system over two types of authoritarian systems, either “a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections” or “rule by the military.” The higher the support for an autocratic leader or rule by the military, the greater is the potential threat to liberal democracy. The support for meritocracy by experts is another indicator since meritocracy collides with democratic rule by elected politicians. Figure 6 shows interesting trends in the case of MPs. First, the MPs’ support for democracy is very high. Support for meritocracy is considerably high, too, and support for an autocratic presidential rule is not negligible either. At the same time, Table 4 demonstrates that support for an autocratic presidential rule decreased from 30.0% in 2007 to 20.1% in 2014 among MPs, but increased from 37.5% to 43.3% among citizens. The MPs’ support for meritocracy decreased considerably from 2007 to 2013 but support among citizens increased significantly.

**Figure 6: Support for Democratic and Authoritarian Rule (MP)**



Source: CMP Surveys 2007 and 2013. Average scores on a 100-point scale.

**Table 4: Support for Authoritarian Political Systems among MPs and Citizens (%)**

		2007/2005	2013/2014	Difference
MPs	Strong President-Meritocracy	30.0	20.1	-9.9
	Strong President	55.4	42.8	-12.6
Citizens	Strong President	37.5	43.3	+5.8
	Meritocracy	50.1	69.0	+18.9

Source: WVS 2005 and General Population Survey 2014, TRI MP Surveys 2007 and CMP Survey 2013. Average scores on a 100-point scale.

The focus of this paper, however, is on the support for an autocratic presidential rule as a potential threat to liberal democracy. We use the general population data of 2014, asking which social groups support autocratic presidential power and if the economic crisis contributes to increasing such support.

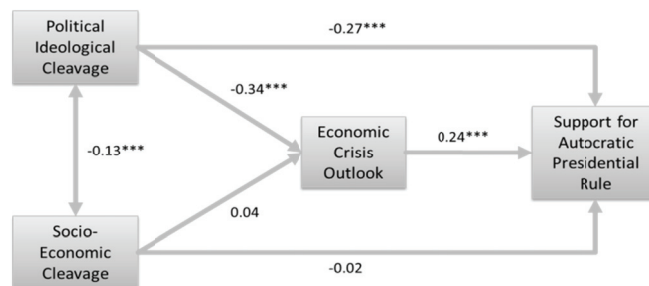
We have computed two path analytical models.<sup>15</sup> Figure 7 presents a simplified structural model, while Figure 8 includes all independent variables. Based on citizens' responses,<sup>16</sup> Figure 7 demonstrates the highly significant influence

<sup>15</sup> We used path analysis because it simultaneously estimates the strength of the causal relationships among a set of variables and is more precise than multiple regression analysis. The standardized path coefficients measure the strength of the relationships of each variable with all other variables included in the model. The direct and indirect effects of each variable are maximum likelihood estimates. Standardized coefficients were used because the variables have different units of measurements. The standardized coefficients have values from -1 to +1. Levels of significance are indicated. The program used for analysis is Stata, version 13.

<sup>16</sup> In the case of MPs, the outcome of path analysis is not as clear-cut as in the case of citizens. This is partly due to the small sample of MPs (about 100) and the much lower level of support for an autocratic presidential rule.

of the political-ideological cleavage on the mediating variable, the economic (crisis) outlook, and the dependent variable of support for an autocratic presidential rule. In contrast, the influence of the socio-economic cleavage on party affiliation is negligible, despite the fact that the negative consequences of socio-economic deprivation accumulate in the lower class. In other words, social class membership does not affect political party affiliation or support for an autocratic presidential rule (cf. Figure 8).<sup>17</sup> To translate our findings into ordinary language, respondents whose perceptions are based on the perspective of state power tend to be more optimistic in their economic outlook and more supportive of an autocratic presidential rule. In contrast, those who perceive politics from the perspective of ordinary citizens tend to be more negative in their economic outlook and tend to reject an autocratic presidential rule. This raises the question of why the influence of the political-ideological cleavage is so profound, whereas that of the socio-economic cleavage is negligible even for the economic outlook.

**Figure 7: Path Analysis of Strong Presidential Rule by Party, Ideology, and Economic Crisis Outlook – Citizens**



Political-Ideological Cleavage: trust government=0 trust citizens=1

Socio-Economic Cleavage (Status): lower class=0, middle class=1

Economic Crisis Outlook: negative=0 constant=1 positive=2

Support for an autocratic presidential rule: Range 1 (strongly oppose) – 4 (strongly support)

All coefficients are standardized ones.

<sup>17</sup> To state it more clearly, there is a fairly close statistical relationship between lower class membership and a progressive ideology on the one hand, and between ideological orientation and party affiliation on the other hand. Despite this, however, lower class membership and party affiliation are statistically unrelated in our 2014 general population survey. Why is this so? Why do socio-economic variables such as social class, income, education, and occupation fail to influence the answers to the political issues under examination? In other words, if the perceptions of the political world cannot be explained by the objective consequences of socio-economic disparities, how can we explain this finding theoretically? This is one of the questions that requires further investigation.

Above all, it should be noted that the independent variables party affiliation and ideological orientation are closely related. In the MP survey of 2013, 87.7% of the members of the party in government identified as conservative, whereas 95.7% of the members of the opposition party identified as progressive. Among the citizens interviewed in 2014, 83.0% of the supporters of the party in government identified as conservative, whereas 79.9% of the supporters of the opposition party identified as progressive. Usually, party affiliation shapes immediate political attitudes, whereas ideology provides a long-term outlook. Moreover, Table 5 shows a close relationship between economic outlook and party affiliation as well as ideological orientation. An optimistic economic outlook predominates among respondents affiliated with the party in government and respondents with a conservative ideological orientation. This tendency is stronger among MPs than among citizens. In contrast, a pessimistic outlook is more frequent among members and supporters of the opposition party and among those with a progressive ideological orientation. This tendency is again much stronger among MPs than among citizens.

**Table 5:** Economic Outlook of MPs and Citizens (%)

			Positive	Constant	Negative
MPs	Party	Governing Party	67.3	10.2	22.4
		Opposition Party	12.8	27.7	59.6
	Ideology	Conservative	71.1	13.3	15.6
		Progressive	14.3	22.4	63.3
	Total		40.5	19.2	40.3
Citizens	Party	Governing Party	41.1	21.8	37.0
		Opposition Party	13.7	20.7	65.6
	Ideology	Conservative	39.1	22.3	38.6
		Progressive	15.7	22.3	62.0
	Total		26.5	22.3	51.2

Source: CMP Survey 2013. Source: General Population Survey 2014.

This finding has drawn our attention to the statistical influence of political party affiliation and ideological orientation on other variables included in Figure 8. Despite the close relationship between party affiliation and ideology that was mentioned before, political party affiliation has an additional effect on the perceptions of the economic situation. Regardless of their position on the political-ideological cleavage, respondents affiliated with the governmental party show more trust in the government's capability of coping with the economic crisis and share an optimistic economic outlook. We can confirm this in Figure 8 that shows complex statistical relationships among the variables involved.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Figure 8 shows that the socio-economic cleavage affects the ideological orientation which implies that the middle class is more conservative, even though the coefficient is barely significant. The ideological orientation, in turn, affects the economic crisis outlook, which means that a conservative orientation fosters a positive economic outlook. It also affects

In contrast, the influence of the political-ideological cleavage is pervasive, influencing all statistical relations. Of particular significance in this regard is that the strong independent influence of the political-ideological cleavage on support for an autocratic presidential rule in Figure 7 disappears in Figure 8, replaced by the strong statistical relationship between the political-ideological cleavage and party affiliation. Party affiliation, in turn, strongly affects the economic (crisis) outlook and support for an autocratic presidential rule.<sup>19</sup> This means that those who support the conservative ruling party (as of 2014) show a more positive economic outlook, which increases support for an autocratic presidential rule. Both party affiliation and ideological orientation wield a significant influence on the mediating variable and the dependent variable. It is also clear that the mediating variable exercises an independent influence on the dependent variable.

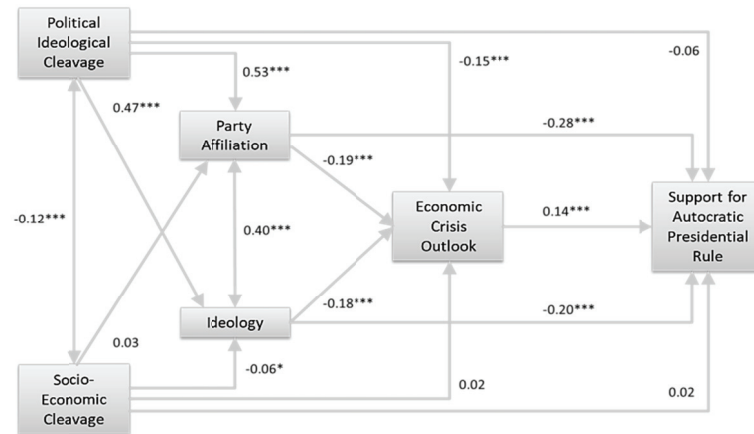
The path analysis thus yields a clear-cut picture. Particularly noticeable is the strong statistical relationship between the political-ideological cleavage on one side and party affiliation, ideological orientation and the economic (crisis) outlook on the other side. The same is true for the relationship between the economic outlook and support for an autocratic presidential rule and for that between party affiliation and an autocratic presidential rule.

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the dependent variable, which means that a conservative ideological leaning increases support for an autocratic presidential rule. Figure 8 shows clearly that the influence of the socio-economic cleavage is only indirect.

<sup>19</sup> In the data of the sixth wave of the World Value Survey 2010, however, no significant relationship between party affiliation and support for an autocratic presidential rule can be found. This difference is primarily due to the difference in the timing of the two surveys. While the WVS was conducted in 2010 and asked for the party vote in the 2007 presidential election in which Lee Myung-bak of the liberal party won by a landslide, the general population survey of 2014 which we use for analysis in this paper was conducted after the 2012 presidential election in which Park Geun-hye of the conservative party was elected by a narrow margin. In other words, in the 2010 WVS the majority of the respondents supported the liberal party. Therefore, it is not surprising to find no significant relationship between a vote for the party in government and support for autocracy. However, the situation was different in the general population survey of 2014 which shows a significant relationship between these two variables.

**Figure 8:** Path Analysis of Strong Presidential Rule by Party, Ideology, and Economic Crisis Outlook – Citizens



Political-Ideological Cleavage: Trust Government=0 Trust Citizens=1

Socio-Economic Cleavage (Status): Lower Class=0, Middle Class=1

Party Affiliation: Voted for the ruling Saenuri Party=0, Voted for the Liberal opposition party=1

Ideology: Range 1 (conservative) – 10 (progressive)

Economic Crisis Outlook: Negative=0 Constant=1 Positive=2

Support for an autocratic presidential rule: Range 1 (strongly oppose) – 4 (strongly support)

All coefficients are standardized ones.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, we want to ask where Korea stands today in her troubled yet successful journey towards liberal democracy. As of June 2018, we find ourselves overwhelmed by the complexities of the changes that have taken place in Korea during the last few years. We refer to four major changes. The first was the wave of candlelight marches starting in November 2016. These marches were protests against the corruption and wrong-doing of past conservative governments and started to bring down the government and to fundamentally alter the political landscape. The second was the prosecution and imprisonment of two former presidents, Park Geun-hye and Lee Myung-bak. The third was the transfer of political power from a conservative to a progressive government after the presidential election of May 2017. Following the impeachment of Park Geun-hye, this election took place seven months before the regular end of her term. As a result, Moon Jae-in became president of Korea, reinstating the tradition of governments led by the Democratic Party. The fourth change finally

was the summit meeting of Donald Trump of the United States and Kim Jong-un of North Korea in Singapore on June 12, 2018, dismantling the persistent cold war legacy on the Korean Peninsula.

Despite these changes, however, the socio-economic and political-ideological polarization examined in this paper is still pronounced and the consequences of economic crisis are still pervasive. Likewise, the antagonism and hostility between the ruling and the opposition party as well as between the political forces backing these parties have not subsided. Geopolitical instability on the Korean Peninsula is still very high as well.

Yet the potential threat to liberal democracy is likely to decrease due to the change in government. We have argued that the potential threat to liberal democracy primarily emanated from citizens who supported the conservative party in power until 2017, because they perceived that their standard of living was threatened. They expected that an autocratic president would protect their economic interests. As of 2018, however, those who support the present liberal government are more inclined to promote participatory democracy rather than asking for an autocratic presidential rule.

Furthermore, we should not underestimate the strong support for democracy in Korea both among MPs and citizens.<sup>20</sup> One type of support is the broad acceptance of the advantages of living in a democratic country. Another type of support is the widely shared perception that the democratic political system is functioning fairly well. Support for democracy in these respects is strong, even though it shows some fluctuations over time. In addition, we should bear in mind the existence of a broad consensus among MPs and citizens on the normative value of the civil and social rights that are constitutive characteristics of a liberal democracy (Figure 4). The degree of congruence among citizens and MPs is significantly higher with respect to free elections, civil rights, freedom of criticism of the government, individual dignity and human rights, equality in education, and minority rights than for socio-economic rights. Even though the perceived degree of their realization by incumbent governments lags behind the normative support they receive, we can confirm the existence of a strong buffer against democratic backsliding.

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<sup>20</sup> The questions for measuring support of democracy as value orientation and as regime support in MP surveys (2007 and 2013) were as follows:

*"Although democracy has many shortcomings, it is still better than any other political system."*

*"How democratically is this country being governed today?"*

In the general population survey of 2014, the wording of the first question was slightly different: *"How important do you think is it to live in a country run democratically?"*.



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# Historical Social Research

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